Syllabus

HIST 118: The United States, 1848 to the Present

Professor Caleb McDaniel
Rice University, Spring 2013

Contact Info

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Course Description

This course is about the history of the United States from 1848 to the present—with a twist. We will be studying this history *backwards*, moving from the present to 1848.

Historians have a particular way of thinking about things that can be applied to the present moment as much as to 1913 or 1863. Our premise is the simple belief that human beings make their futures under circumstances created by events, human choices, and forces that operated in the past. That is, if you want to understand why things are the way they are in our world, you can't look just to biology or psychology or contemporary social and economic arrangements—you must also look to the past.

Of course historians *would* believe that—it's how we earn our keep! But this course will give you the opportunity to think historically, too. I invite you to try it out and see whether so thinking helps to illuminate or answer questions you have about the United States at various moments in its history. I believe it will, and that it will make you more aware of how the past is remembered and used in the present.

Huh? Backwards?

Yes, backwards. Most history courses you've had probably began at some past Point A and moved through a series of events to Point B. This course will be driven, instead, by *questions* about Point B. We will formulate these questions together, and then, in searching for answers, we will work back to various Point A's, all the while remaining open to the possibility that Point A will be much farther or closer in time than we might have suspected.

History can't answer every question, of course (if only!). So we'll have to spend some time learning how to ask the *kinds* of questions historians deal with, as well as the particular methods they use to answer them and the forms their answers take. You'll learn these things partly through trial and error, and partly by attending lectures in which I will model how a working historian thinks about questions. But mostly you'll learn by reading the writings of historians and examining the sorts of evidence they use.

Along the way, you'll discover that the kinds of questions historians ask are usually not easy to answer definitively. Historians engage in productive disagreements over their interpretations about the past, and we'll talk about how to assess and draw conclusions from their debates.

Learning Objectives

Your objective in this course is not to learn everything about the history of the United States since 1848; indeed, one objective of the course is to make clear why such a task would be impossible. While you will learn about many significant events and people in American history over the course of the semester, the course design privileges in-depth knowledge directed at answering particular questions over breadth.

In short, the point is not to memorize lots of dates and names, but to teach you how to pursue specific inquiries about the past and determine

which dates and names are relevant to particular questions. This means learning:

- How to ask good historical questions
- How to draw connections among primary historical sources and evaluate their contexts and reliability
- How to determine which questions a primary source can help to answer (and which ones it can't)
- How to develop persuasive answers to historical questions while taking into account and assessing the answers others give
- How to turn answers to historical questions into cogent historical narratives that communicate the results of your inquiry clearly

What to Expect

Classes

The first two weeks of our class will be spent generating questions about the present state of life in these United States. What do our inquiring minds want to know? We will also spend some time getting organized for the rest of the semester and covering some basic historical methods.

Beginning on **January 23**, however, our schedule will follow a three-class rotation for the remainder of the semester:

- On *Wednesdays*, you will come to class having read and written about some primary source documents assigned several days before.
- On *Fridays*, I will lecture about some historical question generated by our discussion of the primary sources on Wednesday.
- On *Mondays*, you will come to class prepared to discuss a set of assigned articles written by historians on some other question generated by our previous Wednesday discussion.

Then, on Wednesday, the cycle will start again with a new set of primary source documents.

This schedule may be disorienting to you at first, especially if you are accustomed to history courses that are primarily lecture-based. For this course to work you will have to come to class ready to discuss what you have read and prepared to participate. But this routine should become more familiar with time.

I have also scheduled the following breaks from our regular classroom cycle, which we will use to take stock of what's happened in the course so far or work on other assignments: February 20 & 22, March 4, April 17 & 19.

Reading

There are no required books or textbooks for this course. All of your assigned readings will be made available to you in electronic form.

The readings assigned to you will take two forms: primary source documents and journal articles or book excerpts written by historians. Because I will select readings to help us answer questions generated in class, the list of readings is not laid out in this syllabus but will instead be posted on our course website.

In general, however, you can expect about 50-75 pages of reading every Monday and about 25-40 pages of reading every Wednesday—or around 70-100 pages of reading a week. This is a rough estimate to allow you to plan your schedule, but on particular weeks there may be slightly more or slightly less than this average length.

Assignments

On a **weekly** basis, you will write up a brief, one-page "Wednesday Report" on that week's primary source readings, due (as the name suggests) on Wednesday by the beginning of class. Each week, you will also be responsible for posting one *part* of this report on our course website. Details about how this assignment works will be distributed in class.

There will also be **two mid-term exams**, each consisting of an in-class portion and a take-home portion. The in-class portions (given on February

20 and March 27) will require you to analyze a set of primary sources you will not have seen before. The Wednesday Reports will prepare you to conduct this analysis. The take-home portions (due on February 22 and April 1) will be open-note and open-book and will require you to write an essay on one of the questions that has been raised in class, drawing on evidence from any of the lectures or reading assignments (primary or secondary) that are relevant to your answer.

A **final exam** will be similar in form to the mid-term exams, except that you will be able to use any of the material covered throughout the semester to answer the essay question, which will also be broader than the mid-term questions.

Several questions will be offered to you for the take-home essay questions on exam, allowing you to choose the one question you wish to answer.

Grading

Grades for each assignment will be given on a 4.0 scale, and your final grade will be calculated according to the following percentages:

Report Average	20%
In-class Mid-Terms	20% ea. (40%)
Take-Home Mid-Terms	20% ea. (40%)

The final exam is required, but it is also a chance for you to improve your grade by showing what you have learned from my comments on your mid-term exams. If your grade on the in-class portion of the final is higher than your *lowest* mid-term in-class exam, it will replace that mid-term grade. If your final exam grade is lower than your lowest mid-term in-class exam, it will be averaged together with your *highest* mid-term in-class exam, and the average will then replace that highest grade. The same will be true of the take-home portions.

Late Policy

Late Wednesday Reports and take-home exams will not be accepted except in the case of medical or personal emergencies documented to my satisfaction

and, whenever possible, reported to me ahead of the deadline. The same applies to make-up exams: they will only be offered when medical or personal emergencies prevent you from taking them on the scheduled date. If you have questions about other potential scheduling conflicts, you must speak with me about them in the first two weeks of class.

How to Succeed

To take full advantage of this course and meet the learning objectives outlined above, it is crucial that you develop several regular habits this semester:

1. Don't skip class.
2. Take notes in lecture, in class discussions, and on your reading assignments. Arrange to get notes from someone else if you must miss class in the rare event of a medical emergency, illness, or University-excused event.
3. Regularly review your notes outside of class. Make note of connections, themes, and questions that continue to arise across lectures.
4. Plan ahead to make sure you have enough time to complete the weekly reading assignments.
5. Start assignments well before they are due.
6. When additional non-required resources or readings are suggested in class, try as much as you can to take a look at them.
7. Don't violate the Rice University Honor Code by plagiarizing, allowing someone else to do you work for you, or committing some other act of intellectual dishonesty. Suspected violations of the Code will be reported to the Honor Council.

Honor Code

The Rice Honor Code covers all assignments and examinations in this course. Specific instructions about Honor Code requirements will be distributed in advance of each graded assignment, but if you are ever unclear about my policies, it is your responsibility to contact me and ask for clarification about what would or would not constitute an Honor Code violation.

Important Dates

- January 7: Classes Begin
- January 21: No class, MLK, Jr. Day
- February 20: In-class portion of Midterm #1
- February 22: Take-home portion of Midterm #1 due by 5 pm
- February 25-27: Spring Break
- March 27: In-class portion of Midterm #2
- March 29: Spring Recess
- April 1: Take-home portion of Midterm #2 due by 5 pm

Accommodations

Any student with a documented disability seeking academic adjustments or accommodations is requested to speak with me during the first two weeks of class. All discussions will remain as confidential as possible. Students with disabilities will need to contact Disability Support Services in the Allen Center, Room 111.

Acknowledgments

The design for this backwards survey was informed by similar courses taught by Annette Atkins, Kenneth W. Hermann, and Tom Harbo. I also read closely the pros and cons outlined by Tim Lacy and Alice Domurat Dreger. You should know that historians disagree about the best way to teach a history survey, just as they often disagree about how to interpret and explain the past. You can read about my reasons for teaching this course "backwards" on my personal homepage.